

[an error occurred while processing this directive] *Published Monday, May 7, 2001, in the San Jose Mercury News*

# POW issue reopens wounds of W.W. II

## BILL SEEN AS THREAT TO U.S.-JAPAN TIES

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WASHINGTON -- Like Norm Mineta, the last Democrat to represent Silicon Valley's 15th Congressional District, Rep. Mike Honda's life was forever shaped by the traumatic childhood experience of being forced to relocate to a Japanese-American internment camp during World War II.

Also like Mineta, Honda is using that seat to pursue a controversial issue dating to that war.

Mineta successfully sought something popular with Japanese-Americans but opposed by many World War II veterans: an apology and a \$20,000 reparations payment from the U.S. government for each of those who were interned against their will in the camps.

Honda is pressing a cause with the opposite dynamics. As one of his first acts in Washington, the San Jose representative is a leading sponsor of legislation to allow former prisoners of war to sue, for compensation, those Japanese companies that used POWs as slave labor during the war.

It's an issue popular with World War II veterans, particularly the shrinking number of elderly former POWs who thirst for apologies -- and some money -- from the wealthy Japanese companies that forced them to work for nothing under often-severe conditions.

Many Japanese-Americans, fearing a backlash, would rather see the issue buried with the fading memories of that war. The legislation, and the high-profile lawsuits it would trigger, also are a potential sore spot for relations between the United States and Japan. The governments of both countries, and the Japanese companies that might be liable, oppose any reinterpretation of the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty, which they say settled all claims.

### Desire for justice

But Honda, like Mineta before him, said he is driven by a sense of justice that sprang from the injustice of being forced behind the barbed wire and armed guards of the internment camps. It's the same reason Honda bucked many in the Japanese-American community as a member of the California Assembly in 1999, when he successfully pushed legislation asking Japan to apologize and pay reparations for World War II atrocities.

"What we want to do is to give them their ability to have their day in court. . . . I think that's the American way," Honda, 59, said of the prisoners of war. "That's what we guarantee our citizens: their day in court. This is not 1951; this is 2001. And we can look at our treaties and reassess the situation."

But many Japanese-Americans don't want to revisit a time of painful memories.

"I'm sure the Japanese companies and the Japanese people aren't happy about it, and many of the Japanese-Americans aren't too happy with it because it opens up old wounds," said Yosh Uchida, a San Jose developer and a leading figure in the city's Japanese-American community. "Many of the Japanese-Americans have sort of been

trying to forget."

The bill, called the ``Justice for United States Prisoners of War Act of 2001," was introduced by Honda, a former schoolteacher, and Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-Huntington Beach, at a March news conference.

A representative of the Japanese Embassy in Washington described the issue as ``sensitive" and one that could affect relations between the two countries. Those relations have been strained in recent years because of several high-profile incidents involving the U.S. military, the latest being the accidental Feb. 9 sinking of a Japanese fishing boat by a U.S. Navy submarine near Hawaii.

#### **`All of this ugliness'**

``The Japanese government certainly wouldn't like it. They'd feel embarrassed. It brings up all of this ugliness, which they want to avoid," said Uldis Kruze, an expert on U.S.-Japan relations at the University of San Francisco's Center for the Pacific Rim.

The strategic relationship between the two countries was the reason the peace treaty -- signed during the Korean War -- sought to minimize the financial impact on Japan. And the continuing importance of the relationship is why the U.S. government would like to avoid any rehashing of the past, Kruze said.

Honda said the U.S.-Japan relationship is strong enough to survive the reopening of some old wounds. He has met several times with former POWs who have told him the horrific stories of forced labor. The brutal working conditions were portrayed in the 1957 movie ``Bridge on the River Kwai."

``They survived all these different traumas and they're trying to survive this, the last battle, so to speak, in their own courts, in their own country, and we really should be on their side," said Honda. ``Time's running out for these folks."

One of them is 79-year-old Melvin Routt of Tracy. Serving as a machinist's mate on a U.S. Navy submarine tender in the Philippines, he was taken prisoner by the Japanese in 1943 and performed slave labor until the war ended in 1945. Much of that time was spent in a dangerous coal mine operated by Mitsui & Co. under Japan's Nagasaki Bay.

``The ceilings kept coming down," said Routt, whose job was to use logs to help keep the mine from collapsing. ``The circumstances were just work, work, work, not enough food, not enough clothing, and the brutality."

When he returned to California after the war, he was given \$2.50 a day -- taken from seized Japanese assets -- for the work he did. The 1951 treaty officially ended the war without any further compensation for Routt or other POWs.

That interpretation was upheld last September in San Francisco. U.S. District Judge Vaughn Walker threw out a lawsuit filed on behalf of seven former POWs and 25,000 families nationwide against Mitsui and several other Japanese corporations.

Sheldon Harris, a retired history professor at California State University-Northridge who has studied the issue, said Article 26 of the treaty stipulates that if Japan entered into a more beneficial war-claims settlement agreement with another country, the United States should get the same terms. Japan has made agreements with other countries that provided more beneficial compensation, he said.

**Only 20,000 remain**

“These poor guys have really gotten shafted,” Harris said of the treatment of the POWs' claims by the U.S. government. “Each administration has more or less determined that relations with Japan are far more important than the fate of 40,000 or 50,000” former POWs. Because many have died, the number has dwindled to about 20,000.

The legislation in Congress hinges on Article 26 and would prohibit federal judges from throwing out a suit based on the interpretation that the treaty settled all the claims. The bill has 63 co-sponsors from both sides of the aisle, including House Majority Whip Tom DeLay, R-Texas, and is awaiting hearings.

Honda's participation as one of the leading sponsors carries symbolic weight because he is Japanese-American, Harris said. That isn't lost on Routt, who has met Honda.

“Being a Japanese-American . . . he sees what happened and he sees what's wrong,” Routt said.

Honda said he hopes that Japanese-Americans will see his support of the POWs as “a consistent act of conscience.”

Resolving the claims of the former POWs is similar to resolving the claims by him and others who were held in internment camps, he said. Both offer a chance to learn from controversies that many would just as soon forget.

When Honda helped push for the internment-camp reparations, fellow Japanese-Americans would ask, “Why now, Mike, after 50 years have passed? Don't rock the boat; don't bring attention to us again,” recalled Honda. “What it's taught me is change -- and challenges and pushing the envelope -- is uncomfortable, but I think in our country it's necessary.”

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